LEARNING AS DESIRE

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*"Adult learning is vital for guaranteeing Europeans' continued employability and mobility in the modern labour market. Apart from the personal benefits of development and fulfilment which it brings, adult learning also helps avoid the problems of persistent social exclusion that are often the consequence of people having only basic skills."*

Ján Figel’, European Commissioner for Education, Culture and Multilingualism

There is an ever increasing burden of expectation on formal education to steer the life course of individuals toward the employment, economic and social outcomes which are the aims of policy makers. This belief in and expectation from education is very evident in Scotland (Scottish Executive 2003) the site of the research. The emphasis on structure within contemporary sociology (Bourdieu, Giddens and Beck…) has arguably increased the sense of control by politicians who seek to mould the economic and physical environments in which we live. Increased awareness of risk (Beck 1996, Furedi 2004) has perhaps infused the need for legislation to create safe pathways for progression. However some scholars argue that the rhetorical focus of deficiency has shifted from the structures to individuals (Fairclough, 2000 Furedi 2004). Amidst this tension what tools might be available to discern the interests and pre-occupations of individuals for the progression of their lives according to their own frames of reference. The concept of desire opens the possibility of illuminating the concerns and directions of individuals as their vision. It may respond to the questions of the significance of formal education in peoples life and if it plays the vital role which policy makers suggest?

Life history method provides an opportunity to understand the desires of individuals which I will argue in this paper, is questionable that they align with policy objectives. Alheit (1995) suggests that significant learning can always be linked to the physical and imagined contexts of the lives of individuals. An analysis of life stories grounded in the concept of desire implicates the significance of embodied and at times unconscious processes which instigate new the understandings and awareness that we might call learning.

This discussion will use the concept of desire to enable a process of making sense which allows us to see how and why individuals create or reject opportunities for learning and change in their lives. Boltanski and Thevenot’s sociology of critical capacity provides insight into the machinery of desire with its focus on the value contexts in which people make decisions. The Learning Lives stories enable us to see how life events reframe those value contexts and have the capacity to alter the constitution of desire while formal learning processes show little effect. This evidence displaces formal learning from the central positioning of policy makers, who see education as the central means of addressing economic growth and social exclusion (Byrne, 2005), to one strand of many which entwine lived experience.
Desire

The concept of desire permits awareness of the elements which drive individuals to make both conscious and unconscious choices. It is an elusive concept not easily contained by words, evident in the work of the many philosophers who have addressed desire as fundamental to the human condition. According to Hume ‘a passion is an original existence’ (2006, p266). Hegel (Stern, 2002) and Lacan (1989) construct a negative view of desire where it is seen as the drive to fill an absence which ceases once filled. Others Spinoza,(1996) and Deleuze and Guattari (1987) conceptualise desire as a positive driving force which moves forward. O’Shea (2002) defines this understanding of desire as ‘…the means by which we affirm ourselves, by increasing our capacity and ability to be affected by the world.’ (ibid, p930).

The focus of this discussion is not the origins but the machinery of desire as expressed in the life stories of a small group of individuals. The stories of contributors to the Learning Lives project unfold decisions made in response to desires which make certain choices unavoidable and compel an attempt to unravel this driving force. In a world of expansive possibilities (Bauman 2000, Beck 1996 and Giddens 1994), how do individuals rationalise their choices and decisions? Why do some reside in situations of apparent difficulty and unhappiness? What is the fulfilment which holds them there and what needs to change to allow their position to shift?

Any one of the forty life accounts gathered over a period of two years across three to six intensive interviews has the potential to contribute to an understanding of desire and how it influences a sense of self and choices made. I wish to explore desire as a mechanism, a force which affords learning but where learning is the by product of intention. The Learning Lives contributors in very different ways depict the contexts in which significant learning has taken place for them. This is the learning that they define as significant, the experiences, events and encounters through which they have been able to make sense in ways which are new to them. It is their specific interests and values which allows them to translate some experiences as learning while leaving others on the margins without apparent relevance.
David Hume’s exploration of ‘the passions’ is particularly relevant as he sought to understand the world based on the empirical evidence of observation. Unlike his predecessors who took a negative view of desire as a wayward force to be controlled, he recognised that desire is not restricted to violent passions (2006) but that it can also be calm an almost imperceptible driving force which is often mistaken for reason. This is useful to discussion of the life stories as the narrators rarely describe burning passion as a directing force in their lives. Instead they rationalise a pull in one direction or another. Hume (Norten, 1993) developed an affirmative view of desire, he defines desire as ‘a belief system with an objective’ (ibid ). In doing so he creates a link with values. He describes desire as a secondary impression (2006), that is to say an embodied response to a ‘primary impression’ which has a direct sensory origin. Desire therefore connects the senses with the mind. He suggests that we have little conscious control over our ‘sentiments and passions’ (ibid, p266) as opposed to our ideas which are products of conscious thought. The intersection of what is felt and what is believed was expressed frequently during the life stories in the telling of decision making processes. Within this process of decision making that the machinery of desire becomes most visible.

Discerning Desire

Boltanski and Thevenot’s sociology of critical capacity permits a particularly relevant insight into the decision making process revealing operationalised desires. Their seminal work ‘De la Justification Les économies de la grandeur’ (1991) seeks to map the differing contexts in which decisions are made. In this attempt to move beyond critical sociology which they suggest is ‘unable to understand the critical operations undertaken by the actors’ (ibid, p364) they identify a possible but not exhaustive six orders in which belief systems operate and the justifications for choices and actions are made. These can be seen in the chart below.

| Domestic | This realm encompasses values of family, community and tradition |
| Civic    | Public benefit, common will, the good of all and equality       |
| Inspired | personal growth, creativity and spontaneity                     |
| Market   | material wealth, competitiveness and short term gain            |
| Industry | productivity, efficiency, functionality                         |
| Opinion  | recognition by others, fame, celebrity status                   |

According to Boltanski & Thevenot individuals align with these different areas in different situations to make decisions and beyond this to develop a general code of conduct which
enables them to process and act upon the conflicting interests present in the course of everyday life. This conceptual framework was developed in order to understand conflict resolution. While the stories from Learning Lives contributors are not the result of conflict resolution the process of reflection results in a similar process of justification of action throughout the life course. The method of life history mobilises a ‘critical moment’ where there is ‘distance from the present moment and (a) turn backwards towards the past’ (ibid, 360). Within the act of telling there is ‘an imperative of justification’ (ibid, 360) where individuals are compelled to make sense of the life story they narrate. The affordance of Boltanski and Thevenot’s framework is that it places the individual and their story at the centre (Wagner, 1999) and moves away from ..the perennial problem of sociology of being torn between a psychologism of action on one hand, and a grand historicism on the other. (ibid, 1999, 346)

When accounts of decision making across the life course are mapped onto Boltanski and Thevenot’s framework some clear patterns emerge which illuminate the passions of individuals and the significant objects, relationships and events which affect these.

Mapping desire – A geography of values
The life stories display a set of patterns which link individual’s perceived choices within sets of circumstances to a personal value context. The stories reveal strands of experience, decisions and responses which move in a particular direction indicating an overriding location of belief which is stated in most cases both consciously and unconsciously. Hume articulates the strong link between belief and passion when he states ‘a belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting of our passions’ (2006, 82). The systems of belief and evaluation which life stories describe could be seen as insights into trajectories of desire. Three distinct patterns emerged. These patterns are trajectories in which contributors justify constancy of desire change or conflict/confusion.

Constancy
Sheelagh Edwards’ story is one of constant movement. The eldest child in an impoverished rural family she learned resilience and independence as a young child. Her father achieved economic success abroad providing a wealthy lifestyle and opportunities for Sheelagh in education but her values do not find their roots in a desire for material wealth. She narrates the story of a strong desire for self-expression. While she made some pragmatic decisions along the way the overwhelming force in her life appears to be around connecting with the self. Now in her sixties she articulates this very clearly, her main interests being meditation and creative writing. While she found her job as a teacher interesting ultimately the
constraints of work obstructed her desire for expression so she welcomed the opportunity for early retirement in her mid fifties and has been extremely busy focusing on activities which originated in the intention of self-discovery. She values the ‘creativity, non-conformity and emotion’ (Boltanski and Thevenot, 368) associated with the order of the inspired.

Willie Cotter’s background is one of poverty and as a child he experienced physical and sexual abuse. His story suggests that the desire for family stability underpins many of his decisions. There is a great sense of loss conveyed by Willie. His son died in a tragic road accident as a child. Willie believes neither of his two daughters will give him the grandchildren which he longs for as one is addicted to heroine and the other is gay. He describes a value for the ‘personal dependencies’ (Boltanski and Thevenot, 370) associated with the domestic order. All of the many courses and leisure pursuits which he has undertaken appear to be distractions from the frustration of a lack of fulfilment of his desire for family stability and extension.

Fraser comes from a similar background in terms of poverty and abandonment by his father, although the trajectory of his experience has resulted in a far greater degree of happiness and fulfilment. When his aggressive behaviour and rejection of school led to criminality and experience of young offenders units Fraser reflected that what he wanted in life was a girlfriend and stable relationships. He recognised that his current lifestyle was not affording this and knew that this had to be altered. Taking up martial arts and a youth training scheme were moves through which he met his current partner of nearly twenty years. When made redundant he was been forced to make significant decisions. With support from his wife and her family he undertook a college course in social care the field in which he is currently employed. His aptitude for study during his HNC has allowed him to see undertaking a degree in social work as an achievable goal. However he sees the costs of this to his family in terms of the time he can spend with them as being too great and has decided to put this on hold. With his current experience and qualifications he could equally move to promoted post in another organisation. As Fraser likes his life as it is he has no wish for change and is focusing his energies on the quality of leisure time with his wife and children. From youth he has sought the intimacy and ‘trust’ aligned with the domestic order (Boltanski and Thevenot, 368) and although his external situation has altered remarkably his value for family has remained constant.

Shifting desire
Helena Johnstone had in her own words ‘a privileged upbringing’. The daughter of GPs she received her education in an independent Quaker school where she learned of her duty
towards those with less. The path of civic duty underlines her career choices where she has undertaken both paid and voluntary employment in the field of community development. Her greatest commitment she described in one interview was to the voluntary work that she undertook with asylum seekers. She considers this as unconstrained free from government managed agendas. She has moved location and undertaken further training in order to develop her skills in order that she might improve her capacity to contribute to the ‘collective interest’ associated with the civic order (ibid, p368). During the course of the interviews Helena became pregnant. Since pregnancy Helena began to project her life onto a different course. She gave up her voluntary work and anticipated working part time in future. The justification of her life plan had shifted from the civic to the domestic. She is moved more by the thought of the ‘personal dependency’ of her child than of solidarity with asylum seekers (ibid, p368).

Rosie came from an affluent background where education and work were valued. While not an A-grade student she worked hard to achieve. Brought up on a farm she had to contribute to the workings and is aware of the physical outcomes of her labour. When she failed part of an exam in secondary she chastised herself severely for not working hard enough and ensured that it did not happen again, she describes this failure almost as a betrayal of herself. Conversations with Rosie suggest that she greatly values getting the best result, seeing the bigger picture, working through the issues and arriving at an outcome. While very committed to the ethos of the company with whom she works talks more of the quality of her work and of her ability to do her job well than of effecting social change. She appears more focused on her ‘professional competence’ (ibid, 368) than on civic duty which in her chosen vocation may have been important. The trauma of her partner’s cancer has affected a change in values. She talks of giving up her work and moving back to the countryside where she can be close to nature. She has also taken up painting. Confronting vulnerability has opened a window on another way to live which does not involve constant work. The times which she really enjoys now are those walks in the countryside times of being not of production but of the creative expression associated with the ‘order of the inspired’.

Melanie’s shift in desire from ‘industrial’ to ‘inspired’ was similarly brought about by illness. When diagnosed with MS she was forced to rethink her future. As someone who had undertaken a large number of FE courses to develop and hone her skills in science and ultimately IT she was again very keen to maintain her lifestyle through hard work. Her poor background fuelled the need to maintain a standard of living appears closely associated with a strong work ethic. Her illness has enforced a gradual acceptance of the limitations of her body. She could no longer undertake the course which she had planned, she has had to
reconstruct what she thinks of a valuable use of time. This has resulted in a focus on herself and opportunities to express. Time spent having coffee with friends is now time well spent. Instead of working hard to sustain her relationship with her husband she decided to leave him as she saw that he was encroaching on her ability to live a fulfilled life. Although the physical pain that Melanie lives with daily is marked, she is positive about her illness, and sees how it has provided an opportunity to claim life for herself.

Conflicting Desire
The reason for Elisabeth Reid’s apparent conflict might be rationalised in relation to her youth, as she is in her early twenties at the time of interview. The scope of the study does not allow us to explore this area further. However her current situation gives an understanding of her strategy for dealing with conflict. Elisabeth was born into an affluent middle class situation. As professionals her parents valued education and encouraged her to pursue education without her feeling pressured. She believes that she has been influenced by her mother’s values and took jobs in nursing and subsequently in supporting homeless people while undertaking and undergraduate degree in sociology. On leaving university she worked full time for a homeless agency to gain the experience which would allow her to undertake a degree in social work. She is currently at the point of completing her dissertation for a masters degree. While Elisabeth’s educational and career trajectory appear focused on a similar outcome at the current point of transition she expresses uncertainty. Elisabeth cares about making a difference to those people who inhabit less privileged situations than she acknowledges her own to be and therefore has a pull toward the ‘civic order’. However she is also aware of desire for expression linked with the ‘inspired’ and of a wish to create her own family aligned with the ‘domestic’. In order to prolong making any commitment she has booked a trip to travel in the Far East and Australia for a minimum of a year. She extended her diploma to the masters to allow her to work abroad and provide her with freedom and flexibility. She finds it very difficult to pin down what she wants to do or where she wants to be in terms of a linear career trajectory. While on one level she sees this as inevitable she is resisting shutting down any options at this time. The new unfettered space which travel permits is one she believes that will allow her to resolve the direction that she wishes to go.

Kathleen Donnelly comes from a poor working class family with little support, her life was about survival. Her job in the Post office provided her with a security which was coupled with boredom. Living in an abusive relationship she spent her free time enjoying the pleasures of recreational drugs and parties. She described herself as being selfish at this time, as trying to live a magazine lifestyle of indulgent freedom. Pregnancy and the arrival of her daughter refocused Kathleen’s thinking when she saw the need to be in control of her new
responsibility. From here Kathleen left her abusive partner and her job and undertook a course in social sciences. The ideas that she was presented with articulated that which she felt she already knew. She now had words to describe her opportunity impoverished background and an understanding of why progression out of this seemed so difficult for her.

Kathleen was undertaking a community based course in community development. This aimed to secure employment for its participants through a work placement scheme and an SVQ award. She became increasingly cynical about the process throughout the course. She saw that what she was being taught was neither aligned with nor useful to what was expected of her in the workplace. She believed that the funding given to the organisation which ran the course as being misplaced as it failed to take into consideration the needs of the communities for whom it was intended. She believed that she had been lied to as the vast majority of her course colleagues did not progress to the promised employment. Although she completed the qualification she suffered mental ill health at the end of the course and felt left in a place of confusion.

Kathleen describes a number of conflicting interests. She knows that she needs to work to support her daughter and is very conscious of the ‘personal dependencies’ which define the domestic. She talks passionately of social justice and how much she really wants to be able to make a difference to those people who she identifies with as disadvantaged by a culture of poverty. She therefore aligns with the collective interests of the ‘civic order’. She also has a desire for the free expressive lifestyle, the spontaneity and autonomy of the ‘world of the inspired.’. Kathleen’s conflict appears closely linked with the depression and anxiety which she describes. During the last interview her prevailing need is to get a job. This not so much as resolution as a punctuation in her experience of conflict which appears to have immobilised her from making positive decisions.

Machinery of Desire
The stories are a viewpoint onto the significant elements in the decision making processes through which a set of individuals have directed their lives. There are a number of commonalities which illuminate a machinery of desire. An interrogation of these shows strong links with identity and the ability to actively control life choices.

The first and underpinning suggestion is that desire is closely linked with values. Just as Spinoza (1996) suggests that ‘we desire not because we judge a thing to be good, but that we judge something to be good because we desire it’, so Learning Lives contributors justify their desires on the basis of what they permit. Sheelagh knows following a teaching career to
headship would have resulted in greater economic wealth, influence on the lives of others and status, but she does not value such experiences and opts for the route of more independence. Fraser knows that further training and/or promotion will improve his income and his esteem but as he values family relationships these are no incentive for him.

Embodiment

Hume repeatedly points toward the embodied nature of the passions, as perceptions which enter with ‘force and liveliness’ (2006, 7) as opposed to ideas which are ‘faint images’ (ibid 7) of these. Shifting desires appear to be closely connected with physical change. All of the stories which suggest a shift in the focus of desire are linked to the body. Both Helena and Melanie describe the physical changes in their energy and emotion as pivotal in the decisions that they have made. Their bodies have created new consciousness of other ways to live. While Rosie did not experience the bodily change personally she describes in great detail the alterations in her partner’s physical capacities which have had a huge effect on what she values. Her partner’s cancer impacted on her hearing. Parallel to this it is on her own sensory capacity that Rosie focuses her attention. She wants to feel, see, hear and smell nature, she is being drawn to this rather than the fast moving productivity of work which does not permit time for the senses. Walks in the countryside and the activity of painting are increasingly her choices instead of work related activities.

These changes are not simply reflected as a way of thinking about the world but as a way of living. The performance of change is so closely aligned with the change as to be impossible to differentiate. Judith Butler (1999) argues that the desire is produced in the performance and not the performance that results from the desire. Melanie provides an example when forced to live a different life as a result of physical change, which generates a shift in values. According to Hume (2006) ‘reason alone can never produce any action’ (p266). Rosie talks of ‘finding herself’ being drawn to creative pursuits. She did not rationalise prior to this that these would be good for her. The walks in the countryside with her partner are at the same time evidence of and productive of a changing set of values which causes her to question her previous orientation toward the professional competence associated with the ‘industrial order’.

Proximity

Hume contest that ‘contiguous objects must have an influence much superior to the distant and remote’ (2006, 274). Spinoza’s metaphor of appetite (1996) (in translation) also suggests the importance of proximity. Just as the smell of fresh bread arouses hunger so the object of desire needs to be close enough to taste. However this does not allude to the nature of the closeness. While contributors describe an awareness of many possible life options which they
have been made aware of predominantly through the media this does not appear to have had any lasting impact, as for the most part they see their options within their own locality. So with an expansive knowledge of a multitude of different life choices what factors place an object of desire within reach? Fraser’s trajectory shows this as a set of steps which did not commence with an objective of college accredited qualifications. His initial engagement with text based knowledge occurred in order to achieve in martial arts. His motivation was to gain a black belt, studying was an intrinsic part of this embodied activity. However this positive experience also allowed him to see that text based work was within his reach, making it possible for him to imagine completing an IT course and then an HNC.

This closeness contained in the imagination is therefore not physical closeness or knowledge of availability it appears more as the psychic awareness which Fromm (2003) describes. Sheelagh uses the terminology of ‘discovery’ when she realises her capacity to perform the role of guidance teacher while engaged in role play. This activity permitted her to make the connection between herself and what it is to be a guidance teacher. She does not describe this as a learning process because the connection that she made was immediately appears a part of herself – a self-discovery. She chooses not to use the word ‘learning’ to describe this experience perhaps because she sees how learning might be understood as the addition of knowledge. This indicates a dilemma which other contributors share in defining learning, frequently comments are made which suggest that they are very aware of the distinction between formal learning and the very personal experiences in everyday life which affect how they make sense of the world and of themselves.

Proximity and Significant Others
As a support worker Rosie’s realisation that her reading of situations and ability to operationalise the company ethos was beyond her colleagues, this allowed her to see herself in a management role. The following examples also show affirmation from significant others at home, in the work place and beyond which is often a crucial element in allowing connections which are embodied and psychic not just reasoned. These people act as Lacan’s (1989) mirror reflecting back a view from an angle which has not been experienced previously. The affirmation by a boss, tutor, partner or friend is a value judgement which affords permission to become that which is reflected back at them. This mode of becoming of extending and shifting identity coincides with Gidden’s (1994) analysis of modern therapy and the role of relationships where he suggests that;
In a pure relationship the individual does not simply recognise the other…..Rather …self-identity is negotiated through linked processes of self-exploration and development of intimacy with the other. (ibid, 97)

In many cases the life stories suggest that such relationships can be formed out with Gidden’s ‘pure relationships’ found with partners, children and parents where shifts in identity are found where there is intimacy and trust. One aspect of Rosie’s story suggests that such effects can be found where the significant other is neither intimate nor liked. As has been described Rosie has for most of her life story rationalised her choices by her strong work ethic, a need to work effectively. She has been permitted a vision of herself as a manager by her colleagues and her managers over a period of years that have suggested and affirmed this image. However on taking up her current post with responsibility for a number of projects her line manager did not provide the affirmations that she had become used to. Instead he questioned her and led her to believe that her work practice was lacking. Rosie described this experience as having a huge impact on her sense of self in relation to her work. As work at that point was the most significant focus of her life this caused what she saw as a partial crisis. She could no longer trust that she was able to do the job. What seems apparent in the stories is that the impact of the reflection is dependant on the significance of their particular ‘order’ to the individual. Rosie’s manager operated from the workplace and employed the rhetoric’s of the ‘industrial order’ giving him the potential of huge effect upon her. For Fraser whose desires are located in the domestic order’ it is affirmation from his wife and mother-in-law which enable him to see himself as social worker. For Helena it is the responses of the young asylum seekers with whom she works that she cites as important in becoming a ‘global citizen’, what her husband or parents think cannot reflect this image back to her and allow her to become that which she desires to be. Therefore significant others take on significance as a result of their alignment with the value context of the individual. As this process of reflection and negotiation of self-image is ongoing it is subject to change.

Mobility
‘The passions are apt to remain strong and lively as long as possible’ said Hume (2006, 509). That desire is mobile and moves ever forward has been suggested by other writers. The desire for productivity needs constant production; expression requires ongoing performance of self; civic duty constant reform; status ever present public interest and wealth ongoing accumulation. Deleuze and Guattari’s image of the abstract desiring machine (Goodchild, 1996) is a productive vehicle, whose movement defines its existence. Mobility features in most of the cases not in respect to the underlying interest but in respect to how this is serviced. Although Fraser has stopped short of academic progression he continues to hone
the quality of life for his family such as the search for an improved martial arts project for himself and his sons. Melanie’s prolonged engagement with FE as she tells it resulted from an ongoing desire to be continually achieving. The desiring machine which is in constant motion is reproducing itself serving the interests of its particular focus. Sheelagh expands from writing to recital to performance. Helena invests in new and different ways to effect social change. Each manifestation is an extension and adaptation of the last. When this process of renewal is disrupted this appears to result in malaise.

Willie Cotter pines for an experience of family which he no longer believes is possible. He imagines the adult life that his dead son will never have and talks of the grandchildren whom he rationalises as impossible. His desire resides in a place of stagnation. Willie has undertaken many community based and FE courses which are enjoyable but nevertheless ineffective in motivating him beyond his depressed state. He described his involvement in these courses as academic, he presents as an observer, they are a distraction, something to talk about. Kathleen Donnelly was acting on the desire to effect social change through her community development SVQ. However she quickly concluded that her situation was not a vehicle for change but one that affirmed the status quo making her feel more powerless than ever. Disaffected and without a vision of where she might relocate her interest she walked out and sought psychiatric support in order to cope. While Kathleen was not in the state of immobility as Willie appears she has experienced a disruption in the flow of desire which at the point of the last interview was operating to negative effect. This sense of disaffection had left her feeling that there was no way forward and as a result she could not imagine what it was that she should wish for her life.

This momentum of desire as force in a state of constant renewal makes it easy to see why it might be viewed as consuming and in need of control. (Hume2006, Stern 2002) It is evident from the stories that individuals do not easily shift their underlying beliefs as to what is the best way for them to live and what will bring them happiness. Sheelagh gives words to this when she recognises that she clings to desire for self-development and actively resists the value of materialism:

…. I think we’re always afraid to give ourselves a bit of leeway in case we somehow fall into the place we don’t want to be, you know.
She’s recognises how easy it is for this desire for self expression to disallow her material comfort of any kind as this is some form of betrayal of the mechanism which is driving her.

Momentum of Desire
This view of desire might mistakenly lead us to believe that desire is circular and might eventually collapse in on itself. However the stories suggest that while it is not easy for desire to make a fundamental shift, while active it is constantly expanding into new areas reaching toward expansion. The notion of consumption is perhaps related to the relationship between desire and identity.

Rosie’s work progress appears rooted in her strong desire for productivity and effectiveness and she moves through the workplace hierarchy as a result. A series of managers provide a vision of her as manager, just as Fraser’s wife permits an image of him as a social worker. These psychic images could also be understood as Lacanian mirrors though which identity adjusts. Sheelagh’s discovery is not described in terms of learning as she experiences this as a different vision of herself not as an addition of knowledge. The psychic connection affords a becoming which not simply about knowledge acquisition. Knowles makes explicit this connection between desire, identity and becoming, ‘I desire an apple – therefore – I am an apple desirer’. The act of desire becomes of itself a statement of identity.

Helena desires motherhood and is now connecting herself with what she understands as attributes and experiences of motherhood and disconnecting herself from associations with social activism. This disconnection is both psychic and material. She does not begrudge altering her work pattern or giving up voluntary work as she no longer connects with that image of herself. She describes a new picture of herself at home creating an environment for her child. In contrast although Elisabeth is at the end of her social work degree the conflict in what she wants makes it difficult for her to visualise herself as social worker. She sees her course colleagues moving in this direction with ease but recognises a lack of desire in herself. She is unsure if this is what she wants and therefore has difficulty imagining it and making the psychic connections that will allow it to happen. She does not yet wish to be consumed by the professional world of social work as she sees it.

Building Agentic Capacity
This concept of desire while providing access resists prising open the relationship between identity and agency and avoids the problem of taking apart self-determination (Knowles
Where the connection between desire and the renewal of identity has been made, so the action which enables this might be described as agency where agency is defined as ‘the dynamic element within an actor that translates potential capacity into actual experience’ (Scott).

Imagination

Hume’s constant reference to the imagination is indicative of just how significant he believes it to be, ‘our affections depend….more upon the internal operations of our mind that anywhere else’(2006, 208). The imagination is the fertile ground in which body and psyche meet. In the imagination possibilities for different ways to live are experienced. In each of the stories expansion and shifts in desire were performed first of all in the imagination.

Imagination can be see as the capacity builder of the self. It is Fraser’s ability to imagine himself as a social work graduate which makes this a viable option. Elisabeth’s inability to imagine herself as a social worker prevents her from committing this direction, although she has the credentials to become one. Sheelagh’s connection with herself as guidance teacher became real in her imagination. The scenes which Helena describes are of herself at home with a baby taking opportunities to read while the baby sleeps. Her imagination has let go of the images of herself as civic worker in favour of a new domestic story. While reflective reasoning is a key skill currently assumed valuable across education (Schon, 1983 Boud, Keough and Walker, 1985) the life stories tell of the imagination igniting and preceding agentic action. ‘It is in the imagination that obstacles produced by reason might be overcome’ (Hume, 2006, 1,4,2). Kathleen’s reasoned reflections which arose from the study of sociology have obstructed her ability to imagine herself in different circumstances. The evidence tells her that the structures are too great for her to overcome and that she is destined to a life of limited opportunity and poverty. This is not to suggest that reasoning has no place in agentic action simply to point out the enormous influence of imagination in enabling action.

Inscriptions of space

Perceptions of physical space are closely linked with imagination for Hume ‘tis obvious that the imagination can never totally forget the points of space and time’ (Hume, 2006, 274). Space was also recognised by the contributors as important in increasing their capacity to achieve. Sheelagh is on an ever expansive trajectory toward self expression. Her desiring machinery has led her out of full-time employment into situations where she perceives less constraint. One of her choices has been to move to the seaside where she lives in a small flat with a view of the sea. This was a significant decision for Sheelagh due to an unconscious awareness, made conscious through the process of reflection, of the influence which location
has on her sense of her capacity for control. Life by the sea, the sounds, the smells the vision makes her feel more like who she wants to be. It builds her capacity to become more like the person that she wants to be and in turn to make decisions which enact this. Rosie with a desire for creative self-expression looks to unstructured natural spaces, while Helena and Fraser describe the development of their home as significant. Fraser does not wish promotion to a different project as this would affect proximity to his home. The idea of not being close to his family home unsettles him and appears would make him feel out of control. The control that most matters to him is in his family, from this base he can develop activities for his wife and sons which expands and nurtures this area of his life. Different spaces therefore are seen to influence a sense of control and the expansion of that control.

The stories suggest that the internal and external worlds are not separate entities but operate on the same plane. External reality is not disjoined but infolded, (Deleuze, 2006) it merges with internal experience. Kathleen left her home in one location because of the effect that this had in disintegrating her sense of self and she perceived such disintegration in the physical space around her. The external became internal and the internal perceived outside. Such spatial connections are understood in Rose’s (1977) concept of the fold where life experience occurs on a plane without interior or exterior, ‘but (is) a discontinuous surface, a kind of infolding of exteriority’ (ibid, 227). Such understandings of experience are further illuminated in the work of Le Febre (1991) and in Soja’s (1996) concept of third space, a space where the real and the imagined merge.

Conclusions
The concept of desire overcomes the binary which often ensues with an analysis of agency, which expects active choice by the individual that cannot be measured out with a vacuum which in turn would render any results useless. Such conceptualisations of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) are also heavily reliant on the ability to reason while it is clear that agency is a performance not just of reason but of the body and the imagination. Similarly Boltanski and Thevenot’s proposition which ‘takes seriously the justifications provided by people of their own actions’ (Wagner, 1999, 364) permits access to an understanding of agency which is about recognising the individual’s ability to steer there own course regardless of what structures they encounter. That is to say that there will be structures in any society which influence and shape the life course and it is only the individual with knowledge of their own values who can recognise which structures enable or obstruct them. An understanding of desire allows us to see just how they navigate them and what the prevailing influences appear to be.
In return to the policy rhetoric, the suggestion that particular forms of education will address the needs of a diverse population is simplistic and in some of the life stories collected through learning Lives has had the opposite effect of its stated intention. That is to say that it depicts individuals as passive subjects in need of more of a very specific type of education in order to progress their lives. The stories describe individuals who rarely share the desires of policy makers and who sculpt their decisions in line with their own values this concides with Alheit (1995) who argues that ‘normal people …. cope with their biographical problems without adult education’.

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